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# The Frozen Cross-Cultural Conflict: Armenians, Azerbaijanis and Nagorno-Karabakh

Nona Mitoyan

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A major conflict in the Caucasus region since 1988, the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh remains undetermined. Life was peaceable for citizens living under the Soviet Union rule (USSR), until tensions arose once the predominantly Armenian region voiced their desire for independence from Azerbaijan's Karabakh Oblast.<sup>1</sup> The effort to secede from the Soviet Union and unify with Armenia did not seem to be a problem until a bloody war broke out. With over ten thousand dead and one million Azeris displaced by 1992, the bloody massacre erupted into a five year conflict that involved ethnic cleansing. By 1994, an estimated 30,000 people were dead and with the help of third-party intervention by Russia, the signatories agreed upon full cease-fire and cessation of hostilities.<sup>2,3</sup> Since then, Independence has been granted to Nagorno-Karabakh, but the territory remains contested as both Armenia and Azerbaijan assert ownership of the territory. For this reason, all efforts by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group to mediate the conflict have failed and thus, serves reason as to why it is termed the "frozen conflict."<sup>4</sup> This intergovernmental group is co-chaired by Russia, France, and the United States, yet the issue still remains similar to other post-Soviet regions such as Moldova and Ukraine.<sup>5</sup> Although a massive war resulting in victory or defeat for either side has not yet occurred, many casualties have taken place in the last twenty-nine years. The enmity continues.

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<sup>1</sup> Coffey, Luke. "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: U.S. Vigilance Required | the Heritage Foundation." April 6, 2016. Accessed February 6, 2017.

<http://www.heritage.org/middle-east/report/the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-us-vigilance-required>.

<sup>2</sup> Stuart J. Kaufman, Ethnic Fears and Ethnic War In Karabagh, October 1998, accessed February 04, 2017, [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/media/csis/pubs/ruseur\\_wp\\_008.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/media/csis/pubs/ruseur_wp_008.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> 1994 Ceasefire agreement- MFA NKR, May 11, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> "Explainer: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," August 5, 2014, accessed February 04, 2017, <http://www.rferl.org/a/background-nagorno-karabakh/26514813.html>.

<sup>5</sup> "Why the OSCE Keeps Failing to Make Peace in Nagorno-Karabakh," National Interest, May 11, 2016, accessed February 04, 2017,

<http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/why-the-osce-keeps-failing-make-peace-nagorno-karabakh-16161>.

Today, the OSCE's decision remains in tact. Seven regions in the territory, composing approximately twenty percent of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, remain under Armenian control because of the 1994 ceasefire agreement. The Armenian people argue that they hold rights to this mountainous region and vice versa. The Azeri people wish to also regain control of what they believe is rightfully theirs, namely the seven regions that have been given to their opposition based off the OSCE's decision. Many argue that the unsuccessfulness of the Minsk Group lies within their neutral stance, which in result maintains the status quo. However, from the perspective of the two regions, the Armenians are content with the existing state of affairs, given that any other settlements between the two regions will most likely involve a returning of some regions that Armenia has sovereignty over.<sup>6</sup> In sum, "Armenia wants Nagorno-Karabakh to become independent and rejects any deal on an autonomous status for the region, while Azerbaijan wants to preserve its territorial integrity and similarly declines any proposal which might lead to the independence of the region."<sup>7</sup> Herein, the dispute is characterized as self-determination versus territorial integrity, which enclave leader Arkady Gukasyan<sup>8</sup> has repeatedly made mention of. In response to Gukasyan, Azerbaijan's president Ilham Aliyev stated: "We will never reconcile with the seizure of our territories. The conflict can only be resolved on the basis of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan within its internationally recognized borders."<sup>9</sup> Ironically, this was not the case under the Soviet rule. This conflict was initially instigated from Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, who decided that ancient

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<sup>6</sup> Grono, Magdalena. "What's Behind the Flare-up in Nagorno-Karabakh?" April 3, 2016. Accessed February 4, 2017. <http://blog.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/2016/04/03/whats-behind-the-flare-up-in-nagorno-karabakh/>.

<sup>7</sup> Farid Shafiyev, "Ethnic Myths and Perceptions as a Hurdle to Conflict Settlement: The Armenian-Azerbaijani Case," *The Caucasus and Globalization* 1, no. 2 (2007).

<sup>8</sup> Self-declared president of Nagornyy Karabakh

<sup>9</sup> Elmar Mammadyarov, September 30, 2015.

Artsakh (now Nagorno-Karabakh)<sup>10</sup> ought to be under Azerbaijani rule in the 1920's-- as we know it today. With a ninety-nine percent vote for independence, Nagorno-Karabakh declared and successfully gained its independence from the USSR and since then, has desired to reunite with Armenia.<sup>11</sup> This desire has been countered by Azerbaijani desire to re-validate Stalin's decision and ultimately, take control of the territory.<sup>12</sup> In terms of self-determination, Nagorno-Karabakh continues to bring attention to the 1978 CIA report on Soviet minorities, that states:

The inhabitants of another turbulent area in the Caucasus, the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, are able to make a better argument that their oblast should be transferred from one republic to another. The Karabakh Oblast is part of Azerbaydzhan, yet over 80 percent of its population is Armenian and it lies close to the border of the Armenian Republic.<sup>13</sup>

The report further confirms that not only Nagorno- Karabakh is historically Armenian, but it has been during the USSR.

As known, the root of all unresolved conflicts is the reluctance of the two parties to conjoin in efforts of reaching a mutually beneficial arrangement. In the case of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, the first step that has been determined by the OSCE to render progress in the negotiation process, is for Armenia to take the first step and withdraw from

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<sup>10</sup> Nagorno-Karabakh is also referred as the Artsakh republic, because of Artsakh's medieval history dating back to 2nd century BC.

<sup>11</sup> "Armenian National Committee of America," ANCA, accessed February 19, 2017, [https://anca.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Artsakh\\_Talking\\_Points.pdf](https://anca.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Artsakh_Talking_Points.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> S. Chouldjian, Elizabeth.

"<https://anca.org/press-release/declassified-documents-reveal-long-standing-cia-recognition-that-nagorno-karabagh-is-part-of-armenia/>." *DECLASSIFIED DOCUMENTS REVEAL LONG-STANDING CIA RECOGNITION THAT NAGORNO KARABAGH IS PART OF ARMENIA - Armenian national committee of America*. Washington, DC: Armenian National Committee of America, 2003.

<https://anca.org/press-release/declassified-documents-reveal-long-standing-cia-recognition-that-nagorno-karabagh-is-part-of-armenia/>.

territorial ownership in order to sit with a clean start. If this is accomplished with success, the parties would then be able to address their issues and interests, while addressing the dark past that they have suffered together. Furthermore, in order to better understand the cross-cultural conflict at hand, one must not stereotype, but rather make isomorphic attributions<sup>14</sup> to then understand the behavior of another individual in a positive light. This entails each culture's way of processing information, as well as their worldview and values.<sup>15</sup> Values are in a sense the navigation that directs cultures to act a certain way. It defines what is good and what is evil, what is right and what is wrong. As Carley H. Dodd so perfectly articulates: "An understanding of values, therefore, can pinpoint the differences between two individuals from serpent cultures--and intercultural communications can proceed from an understanding of those differences."<sup>16</sup> These values are rooted from cultural and national identities, which are defined by shared history, cultural personality, religious beliefs, nonverbal behavior, spatial relation, time, nationalism, and even ethnocentrism.<sup>17</sup> Such elements play a significant role in creating a social structure that a culture ultimately associates their identity with.

As a culture, both Armenians and Azerbaijanis are collectivistic, nationalistic, polychronic, have high context, high uncertainty avoidance, and high power distance. In terms of time orientation, both cultures are polychronic, meaning they take in and process multiple information simultaneously.<sup>18</sup> In the case of the Armenia-Azerbaijan dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh, both cultures should aim to make sense of the other, as explained by the

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<sup>14</sup> In essence, we put ourselves in the shoes of the "other" (Ackerman, 30).

<sup>15</sup> "A conception of an individual or group of individuals that is either 'implicit or explicit of the desirable, which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of actions'" (Ackerman, 43).

<sup>16</sup> Grant Ackerman, *Cross-Cultural Negotiations and Dispute Resolution* (East Brunswick, NJ: University Publishing Solutions, LLC, 2003), 33.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Ackerman, 26.

attribution theory. Although there is not great differences in cultural terms relating to power distance, context, and uncertainty avoidance, by viewing the other party as rational, logical, and meaningful to the other party, cross-cultural management in this conflict will be more effective.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover with cultural, historical, and religious implications behind this nearly three-decade conflict, it is important to dissect each culture to the core. Through quantitative data, the cultural zone that the South Caucasus are characterized by, namely Armenia and Azerbaijan, identify with a collectivistic state of mind.<sup>20, 21</sup> This collectivism is explained by their familiocentric reliance that traditional cultures tend to identify with. Despite the fact that many similarities exist between these two collectivistic, past-oriented culture, nationalistic cultures, the most important of these intercultural elements, as the past has revealed to us, is and has been religion. The politicization of religion is a factor which may hinder the process of reconciliation to take place.<sup>22</sup> Religious nationalists tend to view their "religious traditions as so closely tied to their nation or their land that any threat to one of these is a threat to one's existence and identity."<sup>23</sup> In turn, this can be an impediment-- obstructing the reconciliation process and creating false perception that the matter before the partisan forces is irreconcilable.

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<sup>19</sup> Ackerman, 30.

<sup>20</sup> Collectivistic cultures focus more on community, rather than the individual. They are more dependent and relationship-focused, which is why they are succumb to groupthink. In addition, collectivistic cultures are more risk-averse than individualistic groups. Zachariah, Michael. Lecture, Straus Institute of Dispute Resolution, Malibu, CA, January 14, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Alexander Agadjanian, Evert van der Zweerde, and Ansgar Jödicke, *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus* (UK: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>22</sup> Jeong, 7.

<sup>23</sup> "Religion and Religious Institutions in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Does the Religious Factor Play a Role?," July 23, 2016, accessed February 05, 2017, <http://www.religions.am/eng/articles/religion-and-religious-institutions-in-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict--does-the-religious-factor-play-a-role/>.

Particularly in the South Caucasus region, religion is an identity factor that one is "born into," rather than a choice of social status.<sup>24</sup> In regards to Armenia-Azerbaijan relations, the Armenians pride themselves in being the first to accept Christianity; as for the Azeris, while there is no national religion, approximately ninety-seven percent are Shia Muslim.<sup>25</sup> Due to atheistic values and principles promoted under Soviet rule, religion was not a bone of contention. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, religious differences began to be apparent as they once were. Analogously, nationalism functions like religion. Both religion and nationalism direct an individual to place their "faith in some external power, feelings of awe and reverence, and ceremonial rites" (e.g. a flag).<sup>26</sup> As stated by Thomas de Waal, the Nagorno-Karabakh "region has been a crossroads and meeting place between Christianity and Islam, Armenians, Azerbaijanis."<sup>27</sup> This intersection touches upon an anthropological framework: the way each culture views human nature, the relationship of man to nature, the relationship of man to man, the temporal focus of life, and even the modality of man's activities.<sup>28</sup> These cultural approaches differ greatly as followers of Islam see human nature as intrinsically good with no original sin, whereas the Christian struggles with the consequences of original sin. These religious differences inevitably shape Muslims and Christians view reconciliation. To add, the temporal focus of both Armenians and Azerbaijanis alike creates a contentious climate where both parties look to the past with distaste towards one another.

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<sup>24</sup> Slavica Jakelc, *Collectivistic Religions* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 1.

<sup>25</sup> "Azerbaijan," The world Factbook — central intelligence agency, January 1, 2010, accessed February 04, 2017, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/aj.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Rogers Brubaker, "Language, Religion and the Politics of Difference," *Nations and Nationalism* 19, no. 1 (November 21, 2012), doi:10.1111/j.1469-8129.2012.00562.x.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> Ackerman, 44.



With that being said, it is pertinent to understand the sociocultural layers that need to be resolved in this negotiation.<sup>29</sup> The complexity of cross-cultural ideologies can only be understood through cultural norms, as “collective sentiments are represented in a diverse set of understandings about the outside world.”<sup>30</sup> Unlike an individualistic society where the problem is associated with the individual alone, Armenia and Azerbaijan, as both a collectivistic and high-context culture, are unable to detach the cultural conflict at hand from their relationships with one another. In addition to their high-contextual approach to life, both indelible memories and myths of the past play a fundamental role. With accumulated animosity from past relations, collective memories of the past push both parties to rely on symbols that are learned and shared.<sup>31</sup> Ipso facto, symbols may reinforce divisiveness that can further inhibit reconciliatory measures on both ends.

While religion plays a tremendous role, both parties cling forth to the historical aspect of the conflict, rather than issues of ethnic and religious identity. Historically, Armenians have associated Azerbaijani people with Turkish people. The correlation that Armenians make of the "other" is the reason why they view them in a fearful manner. This fear exists as a result of the 1915 Armenian Genocide, a conflict that has not been recognized by major superpowers such as United States and Turkey. In result, “Historical seeds of the enmity paved the way for the crystallization and perpetuation of the conflict.”<sup>32</sup> Additionally, because Armenia is ancient and predates the birth of Christ, they view themselves as superior to the Azerbaijani people-- given

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<sup>29</sup> Ho-Won Jeong, *Conflict Management and Resolution: An Introduction* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2009).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>31</sup> Ackerman, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Ahmet Dogru, *Nationalism and Democratization Process in Armenia: Impacts of the Nagorno-Karabakh Issue* 8, no. 16 (2015), accessed February 04, 2017, <http://dergipark.gov.tr/download/article-file/73882>.

that the Azerbaijani nation does not have an extensive medieval history as Armenia does. It is vital to keep the historical background of the situation in mind, since mediators must be aware of psychological factors that can prevent a constructive mediation to take place.<sup>33</sup>

With a history of antipathy, both cultures hold steadfast to the hate trickled down from generation to generation. This hate is not only transferred generationally, but is also taught in educational systems, as well as influenced by the media and government. Rhetoric surrounding this conflict advances both parties to continue forth the hate that leaves the conflict in a deadlocked situation. The wrongful rhetoric used by the media and the government mobilizes nationalist sentiments that religion has instilled too, aforementioned.<sup>34</sup> This form of rhetoric is one that has ethnocentrism rooted at its core. It creates a perceptual frame of reference that is filtered through negative views of the other.<sup>35</sup> This greatly centers on the superiority of the "us" versus "them" attitude that we continually see from ruling parties on both ends. As Ackerman explains, nationalist cultures tend to carry forth these judgmental attitudes that lead to the continual reinforcement of negative stereotypes.<sup>36</sup>

For this purpose, there ought to be a reconciliation committee that seeks to decipher how the opposing parties can find a common ground, despite the great debate surrounding a history of bygone events. As a Stanford Fulbright student states, the Nagorno-Karabakh mediations have only sought to tackle issues on a "super-structural level, addressing only the immediate time and territory of the hostilities. Thus, these negotiations have confined themselves to the narrowest possible framework, reaching only the proverbial tip of the iceberg, and leaving off the agenda

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<sup>33</sup> Ackerman, 93.

<sup>34</sup> Hasmik Grigoryan, Nagorno Karabakh as a Diversionary Conflict, May 30, 2016,.

<sup>35</sup> Ackerman, 10.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

the deeper conflicting patterns of behavior and strategic thinking of the various parties to the conflict."<sup>37</sup> Once there is a mutual agreement about the past, or at least a decision to close the book of the past, both parties will be able to proceed and solve matters of the present. Tackling the problems of the past and the present will pacify both parties, creating a new era of security and collaborative efforts. Regardless of the points of success that past negotiations and mediations have attained, through a "dynamic integration process where national security, democracy, and prosperity are simultaneously enhanced..must happen through co-operation rather than through external pressure."<sup>38</sup> Straying away from forceful approaches and allowing the parties to engage on their own terms may cause positive combined efforts. Realistically, this cannot be achieved in a short period of time. Not to mention, international institutions that have been present in the past must continue to promote reconciliatory measures between the two parties. This includes the OSCE, NATO's Partnership for peace, the European Union and its Neighbourhood Policy, but again, before such intervention, a willingness to participate on a regional level must occur.<sup>39</sup>

Conclusively, in order for the South Caucasus to preserve a sense of harmony across the region, the resolution of this geographical and ethnic conflict is imperative. Many geopolitical concerns stem from this issue alone. If ceasefire agreements are encroached upon by either party, a full-fledged war will result. Despite the fact that many countries around the world do not take heed to this small region, it can definitely be a "domino destabilization," yielding atrocious results, "with the US/NATO and Russian faceoff representing the most ominous

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<sup>37</sup> Dogru.

<sup>38</sup> Abasov, Ali and Haroutiun Khachatrian. *THE KARABAKH CONFLICT Variants of Settlement: Concepts and Reality*. 2006,. [http://www.ca-c.org/dataeng/books/book-1/Abaso\\_Khachatrian.pdf](http://www.ca-c.org/dataeng/books/book-1/Abaso_Khachatrian.pdf).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

outcome for the entire world.”<sup>40</sup> With the amount of parties involved-- such as Georgia, Russia, Iran, Turkey-- there are serious geopolitical concerns to be addressed. As stated by Sergi Kapanadze, a Tbilisi State University professor, the Karabakh conflict “threatens the stability of the strategic Caucasus region which is a transit route of Caspian oil and gas to European markets that bypasses Russia.”<sup>41</sup> With this in mind, cultural differences should be taken into account so that a long-desired amicable resolution may be reached. A mediator should come before the two parties, knowing that prejudices, stereotypes, fears, and interests must be addressed.<sup>42</sup> Through mediation, both parties can trump power distinctions and the optimal result they both intend to achieve.

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<sup>40</sup> “Nagorno-Karabakh and the Domino Destabilization of Disaster (II),” Open Research Journal, August 8, 2014, accessed February 04, 2017,

<http://orientalreview.org/2014/08/08/nagorno-karabakh-and-the-domino-destabilization-of-disaster-ii/>.

<sup>41</sup> “Azerbaijan and Armenia Clashes Continue for Third Day,” The Guardian (The Guardian), April 5, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/04/azerbaijan-and-armenia-clashes-continue-for-third-day>.

<sup>42</sup> Ackerman, 92.

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